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FALL PASTURES

A radio talk by Mr. A. T. Semple, In Charge, Pasture and Range Management, Soil Conservation Service, delivered during the Department period of the National Farm and Home Hour, Monday, September 20, 1937, and broadcast by the National Broadcasting Company and a network of 70 associated radio stations.

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These days we all have a feeling that winter is just around the corner. There's a little nip in the air and the various stages of harvest are visible all around us. Already we've threshed the wheat and the oats. The soybean harvest is well under way. In a few weeks, cotton picking and corn husking will be in full swing. Soon, in most parts of the country, there'll be nothing left in the fields but dead stalks and stubble unless we've been far-sighted enough to plant winter wheat or some cover crop for soil protection.

Farmers cooperating with the Soil Conservation Service in the erosion control program have found that green crops like these are mighty useful in corn and cotton fields during the winter months. They guard the soil against the washing action of heavy winter rains or quickly melting snows. If they're planted early enough and make a good growth, they also provide a splendid source of fall pasture. But, like permanent pastures, they should be grazed with caution at this time of year.

Let me explain this more fully. Most pasture plants are perennials, which means they live from one year to the next. Many remain green above ground all through the winter and start a new period of growth in the spring. But fall is a critical period. This is the time for these plants to store up food materials in their roots. If they can save enough of this material, they'll be able to produce a strong leaf growth early in the spring when soil and climate conditions are most favorable. Otherwise, they'll have to build up plant food as the spring season wears along and the growth will surely suffer. Many of the plants will die; others will survive in a weakened condition; and the whole stand will offer less protection for the soil and less feed for livestock.

This has been amply proven in the case of perennial grasses and legumes, such as Kentucky bluegrass or common alfalfa. In fact, it's an unwise practice in the general latitude of Ohio, Illinois, and Kansas to clip alfalfa any time between the first of September and the first killing frost of the season. North of this region the cutting deadline comes in the latter part of August. While in the more southern states, it may come somewhat later than the first of September. After the first frost, when food has been amply stored in the root system, the top growth may be removed without danger of killing the plant. But from the standpoint of soil erosion control, it's often a good idea to leave fall growth on the land right through the winter.

In addition to using care in grazing and cutting, there are many other things the farmer can do in the fall to improve his pasture and meadow land. For example, this is a good time of year for liming, especially if legume seeding is planned for the spring. Quite often liming will encourage a good stand of clover to come in naturally. In all cases, it will help the growth of

legumes where the soil has an acid tendency.

Fall is also a good season for the farmer to build contour furrows on pasture land. Shallow furrows, closely spaced, will trap rain and snow water and deliver it to the soil. In this way, they'll help to thicken up the cover and keep the soil from washing. Farmers in the demonstration areas of the Soil Conservation Service are reporting excellent results from the use of these furrows.

But overgrazing can nullify every step the farmer may take for pasture improvement. In the last analysis, grazing control is fundamental in the proper management of pastures. Of course, it's easy enough to say that pastures should not be overgrazed in the fall, and that the grass should be four or five inches high at the end of the grazing season. In the case of native grasses on the western range, we recommend that a fourth or even a third of the growth be left standing. But the problem is to provide some other form of feed for livestock in the meantime. Except in the extreme South, it is almost too late now to sow for fall pasture crops like Italian rye; the small grains, or winter legumes.

There are, however, a number of plants which are rated highly as supplements to permanent pasture in the fall, provided they are established early enough in the season. And these plants also help control erosion during the winter. Sudan makes excellent fall pasture right up until frost time. After that, pasturing is dangerous, as it is in the case of sweet and grain sorghums, because of the possibility of prussic acid poisoning. But whatever growth there may be at frost time can be cut and cured for hay without any danger of such poisoning. First-year sweetclover also makes an excellent fall pasture. But precautions should be taken against bloating, although it is less likely to cause trouble in this way than alfalfa or red clover. In sections with mild winters, rescue grass, an annual, may be used to extend the fall grazing season and protect the perennial grasses from too close feeding. In east Texas, this plant follows Bermuda grass quite nicely, and is being used extensively in that sequence.

When small grains, such as wheat, are sown too early or when conditions are especially favorable for grain sown at the regular time, there may be such a rank fall growth that the yield will be seriously lowered unless some of the crop is grazed. It's not unusual for five acres of such small-grain pastures to carry one head of cattle for four or five months. But, on such pastures, supplementary feed is generally required during the late fall and through the winter.

In grazing small-grain and other pastures which lack a good, firm sod, it is highly important to keep out livestock when the soil is wet. Under such conditions, the trampling animals may puddle the soil and reduce the rate of water penetration. That means more water running off the surface and removing bigger loads of soil in the process. Furthermore, a lot of feed is wasted if fields are grazed when the ground is wet.

In some sections it is already too late to seed supplemental fall pastures. In such places, if there is not enough supplemental pasture or winter feed available to ease the pressure on permanent pastures, it may be well worth while to consider selling part of the herd. Of course, when stock are low in

price, it may occasionally pay to carry surplus animals through the fall and winter, even at the expense of overgrazing the pasture and reducing its productivity for the following year. But, on the average, overgrazing pastures, especially in the fall, is a money-losing proposition, and those who practice it are likely to be forced out of business entirely.

There are many farmers and stockmen who now have no more livestock than they really need. In many such cases, it may mean extra income to increase the acreage of permanent pastures. Thirty acres of pasture, producing at full capacity, are much more profitable than twenty acres of overgrazed pasture and 10 of cultivated crops.

I know personally of cases where stockmen have taken such good care of their grazing land that they have been able to buy overgrazed and worn-out lands from their neighbors. Then, through long years of careful management, they have even restored the productive value of this purchased land. Beyond a doubt the proper stocking of grassland is profitable, while overstocking is risky business. Stock production depends primarily on feed production. If farmers and ranchers fail to handle their pastures and ranges in such a way as to produce the maximum amount of feed over a period of years, then it follows, as day follows night, that they cannot turn out a maximum supply of livestock and livestock products.

When we are feeding from a crib of corn or a good stock of hay, it pays to see that every smidgeon is eaten and none is wasted. But that principle does not apply in the use of pastures. Let us remember that pastures are living things and that leaves are the organs which manufacture the food necessary for life of the plant. We can't get full feed production from pastures if we allow livestock to chew off the leaves and blades as fast as they appear, or before they've had a chance to grow. And remember especially in the next month or two that plants cannot store food in their roots for spring growth if their tops are always being closely nipped off.

A good pasture is not only a source of inexpensive feed for livestock. It's one of the best possible means of protecting the soil from erosion by wind or water. A healthy, thick growth of pasture grasses or legumes will shield the ground surface against beating raindrops or blowing winds. Plant roots will anchor the soil and hold it in place.

Finally, a well-established sod is something like a huge sponge. It soaks up a tremendous amount of rainwater, especially when supplemented by contour furrows or ridges. This water held in the soil is excellent insurance against drought. It means moisture which can be tapped by plant roots during long, dry periods. It means less water running over the ground surface and less soil washed down to creeks and rivers.

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